1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
Mirebalais

CHAPTER VII

PROPERTY, WEALTH, AND THE FAMILY

596 THE WORD "family" as employed in Haiti can be understood only in terms of a broader meaning than is given it in Europe and America, where it describes only the most immediate relationship group. Though in Haiti this type of organization, consisting of mother, father, and children, lies at the base of its social structure, the Haitian "family" includes a wide range of relatives, direct and collateral, on the sides of both parents. The immediate family is thus but a part of a larger group, to which it is in many instances subordinate.

611 198 197 It becomes apparent, from even so brief a statement, that Haitian society has not retained that exclusive emphasis on descent in the maternal or the paternal line that characterizes most of the civilizations of Africa. And while a more detailed discussion of the manner in which African and European traditions are combined in Haitian culture must be reserved for later pages, this much may at the moment be made clear: The Africans who peopled Haiti, coming from cultures where descent is counted solely on the side of the mother or the father, and coming into contact with the French, whose custom binds children with equal strength to the families of both parents, molded both traditions into the social forms found

1: Herskovits E-4,5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
Mirebalais

today not only in Mirebalais, but, in their essential outlines, throughout the Republic.

The larger relationship grouping originates in the immediate family, and the formation of new extended families is a continuing arc. Characteristically, the process begins when a man leaves the habitation of his father and, with his wife, settles on land somewhat remote from the dwellings of either his people or those of his wife. As the sons of this couple grow up and marry, they make their homes near that of their father, so that in time a group of immediate families related in the paternal line clusters about the dwelling of this original settler, forming a habitation. The continuation of the process depends upon the amount of land available to the group; in any event, given enough time, land to permit all the male descendants of the founder to support themselves and their families will be lacking, so that the younger men will repeat the process that has been described, and themselves become the founders of new habitations whose members, with the passing of generations, will eventually be lost to the original group. While land is available, a young man is given several hectares by his father when he marries, and here he establishes his household. If the family have prospered, additional land is bought as more young men grow up, so that the relationship group may become a community of considerable size.

In accordance with this rule of residence, only rarely will a man settle on the property of his wife's parents, since to do so reflects unfavorably on his personal status. When this does occur, it is probably because of a serious quarrel with his own people. In such a case, if his marriage endures, he becomes a quasi-member of his wife's family, but unless he has committed some extremely grave offense, such as publicly insulting or striking a parent or grandparent, he does not forfeit membership in his own group.[1] Similarly, the fact of his having settled away from the habitation of his family does not disinherit him, for, as will be seen, this occurs in but the

1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
Mirebalais

591 596 428 rarest of instances, and only by fixed legal procedure, since mere verbal denial of family rights cannot deprive a person of his inheritance.

594 432 434 454 Within the immediate family it is the duty of the man to procure food for his wife and children. When his fields have been harvested, the produce is taken to the house and given to the wife, who retains a portion of it for the needs of the household and sells the surplus at the market, using the money to buy clothing and other necessaries for her husband, her children, and herself. A part of the sum she receives may be used to purchase animals to be used for transport, food, or breeding-purposes; and whatever money is left over is saved, particularly if a desirable plot of ground is available, or a mass and ceremony for the ancestors or promised rituals for the gods are in prospect. The woman, who is held to be more thrifty than the man, is thus the banker of the family. Her opinion is prized by her husband, and though a man has the legal right to dispose of a horse or a cow or his own land as he desires, in most households nothing would be done until (593) the wife was consulted. It is true that quarrels often arise concerning family funds held by the wife, especially when a man questions the accounting given him, or on occasion when he wants money to bet on a cock-fight or for drinking or other personal needs whose cost he does not care to have reviewed. But for many men the problem is quite well solved by the expedient of deducting a sum from his earnings without telling his wife that she has not been given the full amount.

596 It is only in relatively small matters that the membership of a household acts as a self-determining unit. In affairs of greater moment the extended family must figure, for despite the informality of its organization — at least as manifested in Mirebalais — and its lack of legal sanction, its power, especially as lodged in the old folk, is none the less real. It is because of this that it is said: "The peasant consults his elders about everything he does." When a transaction of some im-

1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
Mirebalais

portance is being considered, particularly where the buying or selling of some land is involved, all the members of a habitation may be consulted and the opinion of the oldest man in the family, the "family head," is almost invariably followed. At the death of a man his widow inherits all his property for the duration of her lifetime or until she remarries. Her children by her dead husband, if minors, do not receive their inheritance at once, but the elders of the habitation of their father hold this property in trust for them and act as their guardians. The deities of the *vodun* cult are believed to be inherited in family lines, a tradition that gives the larger family one of its most pronouncedly African traits; while the accompanying African belief in the inheritance of the soul within the family, despite its existence in Mirebalais principally as a survival, is yet of importance in adding its sanction to help maintain the inner cohesion of the group.[2]

It may be well at this point to investigate the position, duties, and powers of the oldest male member of the group, who is the head of this informal extended family.[3] His house must be in the ancestral habitation, though he need not live in the same dwelling as his predecessor. Just as he is consulted on projects of a secular nature, his is the important voice in the worship of the ancestors and the family gods. He does not carry on the actual routine of the cult unless he is a priest, but no ceremony would be attempted without his consent and full instructions from him, and the call for the rite would be made in his name.

Examples of the exercise of his power in various circumstances are given. "He may threaten: 'Very well. If you will not listen, I am through. Do what you like.'" In such a case he will refuse "to extend his hand" when a member of his family meets some difficulty, and a man thus punished forfeits the outstanding economic advantage of belonging to his relationship group, the right to call on the members of his family for aid when he is in trouble. For otherwise all relatives

1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
Mirebalais

596 626 help one who, for example, has run afoul of the law because of attendance at a forbidden *vodun* dance and needs a certain sum to pay a fine, or who in some dispute with a neighbor has had a judgment of the court entered against him. Obviously, therefore, the family head, who holds the power of withholding family support from one in need of it, is not flouted except under great provocation.

596 584 626 Another instance of the exercise of the family head's power is given when a man or woman desires to marry or to enter into the relationship of *plaçage* with someone held undesirable by the elders of his group. Should this oldest member in particular indicate his disapproval of the proposed match, it is most unlikely that the mating would take place. The reasons of the elders may be based on situations quite unknown to their younger relative who proposed the match; the existence of old enmities between the families of the two young people would perhaps necessitate inflicting the humiliation of a refusal when the "letter" was presented. If the young people persist, the elders may say: "Do what you like, but we will not support you," and should they fail to heed this warning, trouble for them is believed inescapable, since it is held that the elders thus place a curse on the new family. Nevertheless, when difficulties do arise that the two cannot cope with alone, the mother of the one in trouble would do her utmost to help, despite family displeasure, and would use all her gifts of persuasion to soften the attitude of the family elders until she succeeded in having the ones who had defied the family edict taken back into the group. Some degree of estrangement would persist and, as has been seen, might cause a man to find it desirable to make his home with his wife's people. The elders may also take the initiative in arranging marriages, exerting pressure on a reluctant young man whose inclinations have directed him elsewhere, in favor of a young woman of desirable family. But should such a marriage not

1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
Mirebalais

be successful, he can count on the members of his family for financial and moral support.

These are not all the rights of the older members of the family, especially of the family head, over their juniors. All elders may punish by beating, though the oldest member of the family exercises that right most freely and may chastise those who are themselves grown men and women. If there is gossip about a boy or a girl, the family head calls the culprit to reprimand him or, if he believes the case a serious one, to beat him. Among the peasants, particularly, grown men go down on their knees before their elders, when so ordered, for a beating. Such punishments may be particularly severe if the culprit does not soon ask pardon, for since all who are older have the right to beat a younger relative, it sometimes happens that the punishment administered by the head of the family is not considered adequate, and another takes up the stick when the family head has put it down, so that two or three wands may be broken over the back of a stubborn offender. If such a one were to fight back, he would become "accursed," ceasing any longer to be considered a member of the family, and even though no legal steps might be taken to disinherit him, he would lose all caste. This right to beat is accorded by custom rather than by law, but an adult beaten by one of the elders of his own family would think long before he would sue. "There is always a consultation, and a man is discouraged from going to court."

Lest the impression may have been given, in considering the role of the elders and their relationship to the younger members of the family, that it is those in the father's line alone who are concerned, it must be emphasized that relatives of both parents exercise substantial control over a person. More than this, since marriage constitutes an agreement between families as well as between an individual man and woman, it follows that both paternal and maternal grand-

1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
Mirebalais

596 [581] [603] parents are friendly toward each other, so that the conflict that might result from a division of authority rarely develops. Were it otherwise, it could easily happen that a person who had been ordered, or forbidden, to do something against his own wishes by the head of his paternal family would plead with the head of his mother's group and receive support to justify his disobedience. To most Haitians such a hypothetical incident was amusing to contemplate, for the elders are said always to work together. Rare is the occasion when one interferes with the decision of another, and never to the knowledge of the subject of such a decision.

596 888 626 A family elder who has no sons to care for him is well looked after by the other members of the group "until the grave." Fear as well as a moral obligation prompts this. "He might curse you," it is explained, or "He might say: 'Watch out for your own old age! You mistreated me in my old age, and you will suffer in yours.'" Such pronouncements are greatly dreaded, especially because of his control over the supernatural forces that aid or harm the family and its members.

428 The closeness of the tie between social institutions and economic life is most evident in the matter of inheritance. For though the prestige that accrues from the possession of wealth makes for strong competition through the exercise of individual initiative, yet supporting the struggle of an individual for the augmentation of his holdings are the forces of family sanction and family aid, while his very start in life is obtained primarily through the help of his relatives during their lifetime or the property he inherits from them at their death.

428 858 As has been suggested, all a man's children by a "legally" married wife inherit from him, or, if he has not espoused a wife by a Church wedding, the children of his *placée* wife or wives receive his property. Whether or not it is true that the 428 858 969 "legitimate" children inherit three quarters of the possessions of their father, the "natural" children one fourth, and

1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
Mirebalais

311
428
769
596

One other aspect of the apportionment of the land of an estate remains to be considered, the matter of leaving land for the support of ancestral ceremonies. There is no general agreement in Mirebalais as to the customary practice. It was first stated that four or five *carreaux* of land, which a man himself had "held in trust," are added to the inheritance of the eldest son, to be similarly held by him. The "trustee" calls in the other members of the family to help work this land, and the proceeds from marketing its entire yield are devoted to the support of family rituals, or used for such other general purposes as aiding a member of the family who requires funds to save himself from disgrace, and the family from scandalous gossip.

The practice of alienating land to provide for the worship of the ancestors would appear to be common in the southern peninsula and in the plain of the Cul-de-Sac; and one person, not a native of Mirebalais, told how he found it impossible to buy some land he wished to acquire because it had been consecrated for this purpose. Certain men cited examples of land which had belonged to the "old, old people of the family," control of which was vested in the family head and could therefore never be divided or sold. But this is land where the family house of worship stands and where ceremonies for the family deities and ancestors are held, something not at all comparable with setting aside workable land to yield a yearly income for services of the dead. The closest resemblance to this found in Mirebalais is when a man or a woman during life sets aside a portion of land or other belongings, declaring: "When I die, dispose of this and with the proceeds care for the expenses of my funeral and discharge these obligations which I leave you." Other persons spoke of land, which having been in the family for a very long period of time may not be sold, since it had proved to be extremely good, and the "will of the ancients" is that it never be alienated. Those who men-

1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
Mirebalais

tioned this latter instance advanced it as a possible alternative to the custom found elsewhere in Haiti, adding that it was the duty of the living to honor their ancestors, and not for the ancestors to make provision to honor themselves, particularly since the dead can enforce the discharge of this duty by sending illness, bad fortune, and death to those of their descendants who are remiss.

To a very appreciable degree, what is inherited forms the foundation of whatever wealth a man may accumulate during his lifetime. Yet there are few, among the peasants at least, who do not seek by all means to add to their heritage, for among those folk the ambition to obtain more and more land is a dominating one. To this end the peasant skimps and saves, depriving himself even of his important needs, until at the proper time some choice parcel of ground comes on the market.

How does a man go about accumulating the funds necessary to amass property? Ordinarily a young man is given a plot of ground by his father, and the produce, as mentioned, is marketed for him by his mother, who saves the proceeds for him. When he marries, his wife takes over this task, and together the two strive to extract as large earnings as possible from his plot. In addition, a man may take a *job*. Such work, always paid for by the unit rather than by the day or week, is usually that of cultivating a plot of ground for its owner, and the amount agreed upon is paid when the field has been harvested. The young man at the same time can also cultivate his own fields and participate in communal labor. Another way of adding to the earnings of his fields is to help the large landowners on their cotton plantations. This work is paid for in kind with baskets of cotton, which in turn are sold to factors who come from the coast to buy both large and small quantities. A man may also increase his income by working in the cane-fields or at the caldrons when the sirup is boiled. Each

1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
Mirebalais

lighted. Chicken and rice may also be cooked for any god except Gede, while chocolate and rice with milk are favored, since it is said "the *loa* love desserts" — a commentary on the very immediate and human character of these spirits.

The actual baptism, or "washing of the head," is performed on the third day of the ceremony by a *vodun* priest or priestess who is a member of the family, though any member who has important *loa* and the necessary *connaissance* may officiate if the membership of the family includes no priest. As at any baptism, there must be a godfather and godmother, and preference is given those who are the parents of twins or are themselves twins. The officiant must be possessed at the time, since, it is said, "one *loa* baptizes another." Leaves of the basilique tree are steeped in perfumed cold water, and the hands of the one who baptizes are first immersed in the liquid; then, while songs of the *loa* and canticles of the Virgin are sung, he washes the head of the person to be baptized. Possession occurs immediately, and the new devotee lies back, half conscious, while all others kneel, seeking word from the *loa* to learn if it is satisfied. If an affirmative answer is given, all retire, the person possessed remaining in the room to sleep through the night. A "ball," but not a *vodun* dance, may celebrate the event either the next day or later, but this is not obligatory, and most often those present, after eating, quietly disperse. The following day the one who has been baptized goes to the family place of worship and greets those who have helped him. Only one further rite is necessary, and this solely when the *loa bossal* is revealed to be a hostile god. Then the *loa*, after having been baptized, is "restrained" by being placed in a jar and buried, so it cannot later emerge and trouble the family of the one to whom it has come.[13]

The ceremony of baptism, in Mirebalais, is in no sense a first step into any *vodun* hierarchy, for, as will be seen, no such hierarchy exists in this valley. One important priest there derives his power from *loa* that have never been bap-

1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
Mirebalais

[8] Mackenzie, ii, 124.
[9] St. John, 162.
[10] Cf. Price-Mars (I), 201–2.
[11] Price-Mars (I), 205, gives this as the proper age for a man of the region of Kenskoff, near Port-au-Prince, to marry.
[12] Cf. Price-Mars (I), 216.
[13] Ibid., 211–12. A facsimile of this letter is given on pp. 213–15.
[14] Ibid., 216–17.
[15] Mackenzie, i, 58.
[16] St. John, 145–6.
[17] St. John, 145.
[18] Mackenzie, i, 57. Wirkus, 222, mentions a case of polygyny on the Isle à Gonave where the wives apparently inhabited one compound with their mutual husband.

CHAPTER VII

[1] This seems to differ in various parts of Haiti; thus, near Port-au-Prince, the father of the girl "designates to his future son-in-law the land where his house is to be built," according to Price-Mars (I), 216.
[2] Cf. Parsons (I), 163.
[3] Among the obligations of the peasant mentioned by Price-Mars (I), 34, is "the respect due to the elders who are the repositories of tradition."

CHAPTER VIII

[1] Whether or not *vodun* is a religion, a problem which Haitian writers (e.g., Price-Mars (I), 32 ff.) are prone to debate at length, need not be considered here, since to an ethnologist the answer is too patently affirmative to require discussion.
[2] St. Mery, i, 45–6.
[3] Ibid., i, 46.
[4] De Vassière, 178–9.
[5] Dorsainvil (I), 136 ff.; Price-Mars (I), 39.
[6] For a useful resumé of statements concerning Haitian serpent-worship, the grievous misunderstanding of which is an outstanding characteristic of this honest but ill-conceived work, see Williams, *passim*.
[7] Price-Mars (I), 118 ff., also records his belief that serpent-worship is far less important than it has been represented, saying: "We believe it to be well-nigh abolished." Seabrook, 310–12, also holds to this view.
[8] Parsons (I), 157, states: "There is little or no philosophic or religious expression of the theory to be

Courlander B-6 (1937-1954) 1960 8V3 Hait 8V3

For many Haitians, the struggle to obtain a piece of ground and to hold onto it is the very heart of the struggle for existence. On Morne l'Hôpital in 1932 I knew a man who owned ten acres of gardens. He had it planted in bananas and plantains, yams, and cotton. He had two cows and a calf and a grove of mango trees and coconut palms. His house was clean, tidy, and by Haitian standards well furnished. Eighteen years later he had less than an acre of land, no trees, no cotton, and no cattle. His family had become impoverished. He had three grown children and virtually no land to leave to them except that on which the house stood. His troubles began with a lawsuit over his land title. He sold his cattle to raise money to pay his court expenses. He lost half of his land as a result of the lawsuit, most of it the part with the good trees. Later, he sold more land to raise "eating money," and then rented it from the new owner. He could not grow enough cash crops to pay the rent and was finally evicted. Today he has not enough ground left on which to grow food for himself and his wife the year round.

The diminution of adequate landholdings has resulted in the disappearances of many of the *lavours* (hamlets) that were a familiar sight a few decades ago. Young people traditionally built their houses near the family homesteads until there were five, six, or a dozen houses in a group. There was a natural family community which shared a common social life and the work of the fields. But as the population increased and the landholdings shrank, young people and old began to move away in search of new land, or work in the cities. Often where the lavour remains it is only as a settlement of landless house renters who work where they may for wages.

Economic refugees from rural areas seek wage work in the cities, returning to their original homes only on special festive days for family reunions. The men find employment as gardeners, servants, construction laborers, and stevedores. Some find work on the sugar and sisal plantations, others in craft industries making straw hats, baskets, shoes, chairs, and mahogany ware for export. The struggle in the big city of Port-au-Prince is for many of them worse than the poverty they left behind. There are the inevitable slums and the constant threat of hunger. It is in the big city that one hears most often the words *mwin grangou* (I am hungry), and least often the words *Bondieu bon* (God is good).

The land hunger increases, and the overflow of the mountain settlements continues to move cityward. In former years there was a trend toward emigration across the eastern border into the Dominican Republic, which has a population density roughly one third or one fourth that of Haiti. This trend was checked, temporarily at least, in 1937 by